

The Best of Both Worlds ——Building Gardens With a Sense of Place

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Abstract: The last decade in China has been a period of great growth and renewal. More and more public garden has been built, many those gardens are built with Western-influenced styles and lack of Chinese factor. A garden with a strong sense of place will clearly put the visitor in a specific locality by astute use of design to support a distinctive regional character. Here the author gives several examples of famous gardens about how to keep the sense of place and try to give some useful suggestion on Chinese garden build.

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The last decade in China has been a period of great growth and renewal. Resource commitments to public gardens have increased significantly in this time, with many institutions broadening their missions in public display and education for the benefit of their communities. Learning and teaching about plants and their important role in our lives has become more important for us all as concerns about environmental health have intensified.

In the rush to build bigger and better gardens, the personality and character that has made the old, historic gardens of China so popular has been diminished. The *sense of place* has been lost as new gardens are built with Western-influenced styles. Some aspects of the new gardens have become design-general, lacking in visible geographic placement keys; they might be physically located anywhere in the world if one was to draw only on the architectural clues as to locale. A garden with a strong sense of place will clearly put the visitor in a specific locality by astute use of design to support a distinctive regional character.

It is possible to have the best of both worlds. A new garden can be designed to benefit from the experiences of Western gardens with well-developed

plans for visitor services, children's activities, internal transportation modes and public safety issues to develop a program. The incorporation of these Western concepts does not require the abandonment of the traditional Chinese style, but rather a carefully crafted union between Eastern aesthetics and Western programming. It is possible to marry the two systems, with modern programs delivered successfully in a classical Oriental setting (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Signpost at Nimrod Fortress National Park, Israel
(Photo Pat Raven© 2008)

Garden design in many diverse countries frequently copies Western historic styles, thus losing the unique local character that makes gardens spe-

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cial. My passion is to seek out and treasure the original and unique. Many of you have hosted me and my camera in your gardens and wild areas and helped me to learn and understand the special personality that makes a particular garden memorable.

Reading the landscape – What is regional vernacular?

The particular local architecture and planting style specific to an area is called *regional vernacular*; it helps to create the sense of place that tells you why a particular garden is special to its locale. Learning how to *read the landscape* is learning to recognize and treasure the design elements of a garden style that make it different and individual. Original designs based in traditional styles and local materials can engender a sense of place. To understand this concept, look around your own area for design inspiration. Try to identify:

- Local specialty plants
- Classical stone design
- Historical symbols and folklore references
- Local craftsmanship
- Artistic and musical inspirations

Vernacular design evolves over time with the distinctive contributions of regional cultural traditions and local environment.

Trends in contemporary landscape design are moving away from the heavy footprint of human manipulation and returning to more subtle and subservient interpretations of design. In the history of Western style landscaping, cows and sheep created the original clipped lawn and deer sculpted the shaped hedges and topiaries. These signature styles have become associated with the “classic” English landscape. While this gardening form epitomizes the regional vernacular of England and is perfectly suited to the natural environment in the British Isles, it looks awkward and out-of-place when literally translated to other parts of the world.

Equally difficult to replicate and appreciate abroad are the forced landscapes of classic French

17th Century gardens. These rigidly formal landscapes were based in geometry and power-man’s power over nature-to level earth and align trees in geometrical perfection. Hugely expensive to create and maintain, these gardens also symbolized money and power.

Travel makes it much easier to spot the particular materials and craftsmanship that are unique only to each different region. It is the one-of-a-kind combination of social history, traditional construction style and local materials that produce our most engaging regional garden landscapes.

Crafting a master plan

It is important to understand the strategic goals and needs for our facilities so that we may plan and build as well as possibly. The physical facilities to support research, educational and public visitor needs are different. Finding the proper balance between collections assembled for conservation and research purposes, landscape art and horticulture and public access and enjoyment may be challenging: the purposes need to be met in different ways from one institution to another. As garden missions broaden to include biodiversity and plant conservation programs, plant collection guidelines will shift and the kinds of plants put out for public display will change. Placing these varied functions within a beautiful, aesthetically successful landscape does not happen by accident, but is the result of excellence in planning and design.

A comprehensive planning document—a *Master Plan*—is essential to create appropriate guidelines for the consistent future development of the property as a whole. Such a Master Plan should be based on an institution’s Mission Statement and take into account the garden’s audience and location. This Master Plan must be strong yet flexible in order to guide the process of planning for years to come, and it should be modified as it is executed and developed over the years.

The landscape planning process for botanical

gardens includes the development of the physical framework, the infrastructure of water, power, roadways that service the garden.

Historically, botanical gardens all over the world have grown like clumps of bamboo with a runner here and a shoot there, these growing in a random pattern as funding is available. Now, botanical gardens have greater resources and larger responsibilities making the lack of long-range planning a more serious problem. A given amount of resources used wisely may result in a lovely, seamless vision; the same amount of money and other resources used unwisely can lead to a choppy, discontinuous patchwork.

The Missouri Botanical Garden's Master Plan might be used as one model or example and includes:

Plans based on a clear Mission Statement

First plan developed in 1972, is reviewed frequently and revised every few years

Design team includes garden staff, trustees and MTR design firm

Includes input from the public

Unifies the vision for all

Gives structure, like a spine, to the body of the garden

Guides everyday management decisions

Sets style standards

Allows for changing needs and new technologies

Allows for long-range infrastructure planning

New gardens fit within the existing framework

Every garden will have a different balance of mission, audience, product and financial opportunity.

Successful design-creating a signature style

A strong design concept may also incorporate the idea of a signature style, a unique approach to linking elements within a larger plan. Items that may be included in such a signature style grouping would include logos, color schemes and type faces for signage; consistent imagery and overall continuity; and cohesiveness for the entire design palette.

Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, is known worldwide for its fountain displays. In both French and Italian styles, these great waterworks provide a distinctive garden element. Specialty constructed Open Air Theatre Fountains and computer-controlled dancing fountains create a platform for entertainment and special events. Longwood has built a visitor program around these wonderful water features including the annual *Festival of Fountains* and July *Fireworks & Fountains* celebration of our national holiday.

Color and texture statements have been used to create signature looks. The great English landscape designer Gertrude Jekyll used a painterly approach to her garden designs. Heavily influenced by Impressionist art, and especially by JMW Turner's fluid style, she used a subtle palette of floral and foliage to create magnificent floral borders. Another very distinctive style was that developed by Roberto Burle Marx. He is credited with bringing modernist landscape architecture to Brazil. With strong lines, tropical textures and brilliant colors, Marx's landscapes are unforgettable.

A consistent design palette unifies the garden and creates an elegant cohesion linking together areas of diverse function. Jumping styles frequently in garden design is not restful or pleasing. Think of a building a wall-color, framing, dimensions-as a base for individual pieces of art to hang on it. The master plan provides that wall and the individual gardens in it are the paintings.

Special exhibits and focused programs

The Missouri Botanical Garden has made a conscious effort to plan areas and events for special purposes. We designed and built a *Children's Garden* when we wanted to increase the attendance and involvement of families with young children. The garden theme is specific to our region with a design format of frontier St. Louis at the time of Henry Shaw, our founder, in the mid-1850's. Writer Richard Louv has made it clear that the environmentalist of tomor-

row is the child who learns to love nature today.

Our signature autumn event is called *The Best of Missouri Market* and is a craft sale with food and products all made or grown within a few hundred kilometers of our garden. While we do present exhibits that are not Missouri-specific, there is some natural connection to the garden world. Our Chihuly glass show featured many plant and animal forms and was carefully staged to integrate into the landscape of the existing gardens. Change of this kind makes for freshness and helps maintain visitor interest (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Good planning can help solve design challenges
(Photo by Pat Raven© 2008)

Regional planning challenges-case studies

Solving the unique demands of incorporating



Fig. 3 Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland
(Photo by Pat Raven© 2010)

large numbers of people into living collections can make for some enjoyable design challenges. Using local materials and creative fabrication to satisfy special needs can provide a ready means for expressing the regional vernacular. Some examples of sensitive development that support the idea of sense of place are included in the following figures.

Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland (Fig. 3, 4 and 5)

Public safety is a keen issue in this heavily visited natural area. The attraction is the broad vista with a dramatic wave of 700 foot cliffs sweeping down to the ocean. Several bird nesting colonies draw people to try to look over the edge for a better view. The challenge is that this “edge” has not been clearly defined and, in the past, ten to twelve people each year fell to their deaths by getting too close. The solution includes a carefully crafted wall channeling pedestrians from one overlook platform to another keeping them a safe distance from the edge of the cliff. By using local stone slabs in overlapping plates, the wall echoes the vista of overlapping cliffs. Further interpretation placed the new, large visitor center underground. This placement is clearly subservient to the natural landscape and made it possible to preserve the pastoral scenery with grazing cows. The design clues are taken directly from the natural landscape, illustrating a newer way of thinking about our relationship with nature.



Fig. 4 Landscape design retaining wall uses overlapping plates
of native stone to mirror the layering of the cliffs beyond
(Photo by Pat Raven© 2010)



Fig. 5 New Visitor Center designed to disappear into the landscape and not compete with the natural beauty of the cliffs beyond (Photo by Pat Raven© 2010)

Wadi Hitan, Valley of Whales, UNESCO World Heritage site, Egypt (Fig. 6)

These visitor comfort buildings are deliberately subservient to a grand landscape that features both magnificent eroded stone columns and significant paleontological research sites. They were designed to disappear completely into the broader landscape. Built only of local materials and inexpensively with local labor, the design imitates the natural form of the wind-swept stone pillars and is finished in a stucco pattern that matches their color and texture. Further enhancement comes from the shadow patterns cast by the woven willow shades, made of materials collected from a nearby oasis. Very inexpensive and elegant,

these shelters fit perfectly into the scenery.

Bloedel Reserve, Bainbridge Island, Washington State (Fig. 7)

With an emphasis on the natural landscape and serene visitor experience, Bloedel limits visitors to 20 per hour. Mostly informal in style, the more constructed formal gardens fall within woodlands and wetlands like pearls on a necklace. Experiencing nature quietly is central to the program in this garden and, to that end, visitors are allowed into sensitive areas by special boardwalks designed for protecting both native vegetation and natural water flow. Like the Missouri Botanical Garden, Bloedel was planned by MTR.



Fig. 6 Sun shelter for visitors made by local craftsmen using native materials to echo the surroundings at the UNESCO World Heritage site Wadi Hitan (Valley of Whales), Egypt and not compete with it (Photo by Pat Raven© 2008)



Fig. 7 Shaded walkway with sloped paving for harvesting rain water in the dry Negev Desert campus of the Albert Katz International School for Desert Studies of the Ben-Gurion University, Israel (Photo by Pat Raven© 2008)

**Jacob Blaustein institutes for desert research,
Ben-Gurion University, Israel (Fig. 8)**

This research facility was designed to facilitate desert studies including water resources, agriculture and desert architecture. The modern campus, located in the Negev Desert, is a great example of a plan that exhibits a strong regional vernacular. Structures are built entirely of local stone but with a modern architectural style to maximize shading and water collection. The local environment is very hot and dry, so landscaping is done with a selection of plants from the wild, often with ancient uses, and a tolerance for harsh growing conditions.

All of these examples show a new concept in landscaping—that man's concept of dominion over the earth is changing and landscape designs are now being

created that are in a more complete harmony with nature as it exists in the particular area. Living lightly on the land, formerly a visionary concept, becomes increasingly necessary with every passing year. We tend to think now in terms of editing and enhancing the landscape and not of altering it completely. Perhaps we are realizing that we are a part of the world and not its masters.

What is the Chinese regional style?

Some of the design elements that are associated with the Chinese landscape tradition are tall thin irregular stones, clumps of bamboo, the ample use of bamboo for architecture, lovely handmade tiles and elegant stonework of all kinds (Fig. 9, 10). Color has strong traditional meaning in China, with Imperial Yellow and



Fig. 8 Elevated boardwalk at Bloedel Reserve protects plants and natural water flow, yet allows access to unique environments by pedestrians (Photo by Pat Raven© 2005)



Fig. 9 Simple, elegant, ancient stonework from the UNESCO World Heritage Site Classical Gardens of Suzhou (Photo by Pat Raven© 2005)

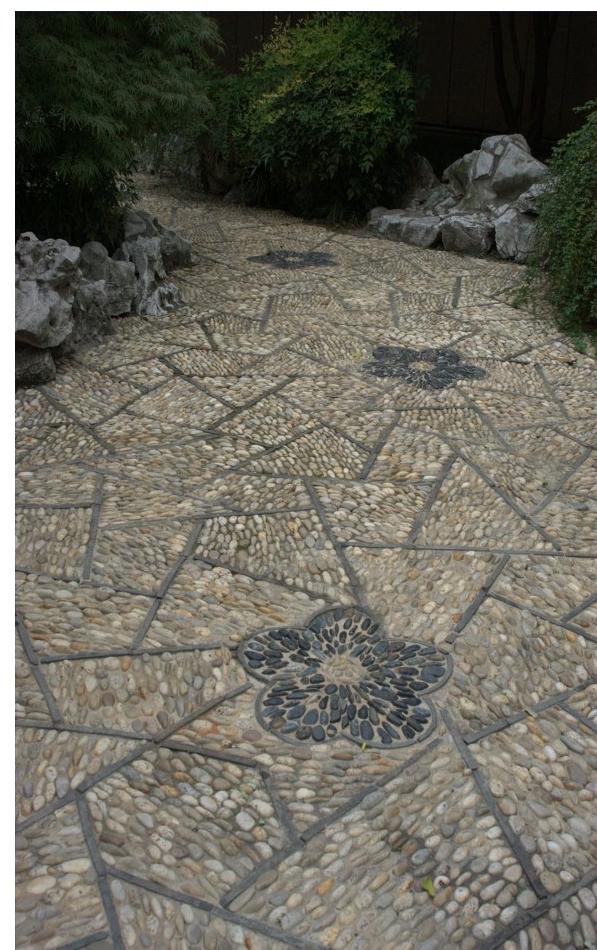


Fig. 10 Contemporary interpretation of traditional stonework path in Suzhou (Photo by Pat Raven© 2005)

Chinese Red having particularly strong significance.

The Chinese vernacular style includes many elements—stone, water, reflection, and in urban areas, a sense of enclosure. There are just as many regional variations to garden design as there are to Chinese cooking. Just as the presence or absence of spices may indicate origin, the stone styles, water forms and plant selections link historic garden designs to the area of the country to which they are native or where they have developed the most horticulturally. One of my favorite stylistic devices is the use of water as second canvas for doubling the art of architecture, sky and plants.

The artisans of China have elevated the design of stone and tile paving styles to the level of fine art. This is a very special and unique craft that has evolved over centuries of garden design. The craftsmen who design and install these beautiful mosaics must be treasured and honored as gardens are developed. Do not lose this signature style element!

The development of the courtyard garden was partly in response to increasing urban population density and the desire to delimit personal space. The boundary walls created a sense of enclosure and peace, separating private garden space from public thoroughfares. Internal walls pierced with decorative tile panels create a sense of intrigue, of more surprises yet to come. The quaint use of hanging gardens with trellises or wooden forms evolved through need of growing space because of the lack of land available for garden use. Larger strolling gardens, while less common, used the architectural distinction of pavilions with upturned flying eaves and promenades with intricate wood carving to yield immediate clues about the sense of place. The social needs and construction materials at hand resulted in the creation of a Chinese garden vocabulary with extreme sophistication and diversity.

The kinds of plants used in older gardens yielded a strong sense of place that complemented the infrastructure construction. Without climate controlled glass houses and global transportation, the

plant palette was more restricted and often secondary to the built environment. The traditional Chinese planting list of bamboos, rhododendrons, camellias, forsythia, and osmanthus reflected a limited palette of plants and did not stress the kind of diversity we associate with a modern botanical garden. These traditional plant groups, however, were developed over the centuries into innumerable cultivars. In tree peonies alone, there are hundreds of different cultivated strains. The selection of unique growth patterns with specialized pruning techniques resulted in the development of elaborate stylized Pen Jing, such fascinating cultivars as Long Zhou Huai (dragon claw tree, *Sophora japonica* cv. ‘Pendula’).

Contemporary interpretation of the ancient Chinese garden style is possible. By using a simplified and yet sophisticated treatment of water and architecture, one can make a clear design statement about *being* in China without at the same time attempting to copy of historic Chinese practices literally. The endless variation of bamboo edging detail is just one example where creative expression is based only in the commonality of the construction material, in this case, bamboo.

Stone has been used most effectively to interpret local distinction. Red granite, white marble, green bamboo stones, and Tai Hu stones speak eloquently to the sense of place. Compositions of natural forms as sculptural elements or stone carvings into decorative items such as bridge railings and lanterns reflect well historical Chinese styles. Re-interpreting historic paving patterns into modern gardens provides a striking reflection of the traditional Chinese vernacular. The diversity and evolution of paving styles over time speak strongly of both the regional choice of materials and individual craftsmanship. Perhaps my most favorite signature of Chinese gardens, these decorative mosaic paths made of pebbles, stone chips, slices of ceramic roof tiles and fragments of broken rice bowls are uniquely and beautifully Eastern. One glimpse of this style of paving immediately creates a special, wonderful Chinese sense of place.